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Author(s): Gitta Yaffe and Uriel Dann
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Suleiman al-Murshid: Beginnings of an Alawi Leader

GITTA YAFFE

In Memory of Professor Uriel Dann

Following the end of World War I, the French created an autonomous political entity in the Alawi region, in north-west Syria. Its Advisory Council was destined to be the foundation for future local administration. Two tribal chiefs, of the larger Alawi confederations, Jaber al-Abbas and Ibrahim al-Kinj, served as Presidents of this institution.[1]

Without any encouragement from the French, and in fact despite their efforts to curb him, a small and unknown tribal chief, Suleiman al-Murshid, gradually stepped out of the Alawi hinterland, into the foreground of Alawi, and later Syrian, politics. He did not seem to have much interest in issues of unity with Syria, or of Alawi autonomy; he was friendly neither with the French and their allies nor with the supporters of unity with Syria. His activity concentrated on inter-tribal matters which proved to be crucial as sources of power and influence. Eventually becoming part of the centrifugal forces which demanded separation from Syria, al-Murshid played a major role in the local political scene. For several years he overshadowed other personalities and events and caused conflict and disarray both nationally and internationally.[2]

In contradictory reports al-Murshid was described either as a bandit and self-appointed demi-God,[3] or as one of the 'authentic Alawi phenomenae' who brought nothing but benefit to his people[4] and upon whom 'divinity' had been bestowed by his own people, against his explicit wish.[5] Until today, several decades after al-Murshid and his son Mujib lost their lives in the turbulent events of Syria's birth as an independent state, the enigma of Suleiman al-Murshid still captures the imagination of many Alawis, who cherish and revere the memory of both men.[6] This article will try to elucidate the earlier aspects of this mystery.

An eighteenth-century Alawi manuscript, *Fi Taqwim Jabal Lubnan*,[7] allows us an interesting glimpse at the traditional duties of the Alawi *Rijal ad-Din*. These men were still functioning in the Alawi region at least until the middle of the twentieth century, not only as spirituai leaders, but also

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as *zakat* collectors,[8] astrologers and soothsayers. It was their prerogative to choose the propitious days for harvesting or for marriages, as well as for armed raids and such like. Side by side with the *Rijal ad-Din* there was the parallel rival leadership of the Ra'is, who also collected taxes of all kinds and was also able to protect his followers against depredation by the authorities. The Syrian nationalist author Munir ash-Sharif described how difficult it was for the Numailatiyya Ra'is to hold on to his position against his tribe's Men of Religion, who aspired to replace him.[9] An Alawi Ra'is, according to Strothmann, functioned in a manner quite similar to that of a Bedouin Ra'is.[10] At times of war he would recruit warriors from all the tribes that were under his influence; it was also his prerogative to pass on his position to his son or nephew, and he was obliged to maintain an open guest house (*Manzal*), towards the expenditure of which all tribesmen contributed. It was also his privilege to get his share of gifts, presented to the couples married by him.

As an outstanding example of such an Alawi chief, in whom both functions, of Ra'is and *Rajul ad-Din* were combined, Strothmann[11] singled out Suleiman al-Murshid, the controversial *Muqaddam* (chief) of the Amamra tribe, who founded the new Ghassasneh tribal confederation.[12]

Al-Murshid was born in 1905 in Jobet Burghal, on the western slopes of Jibal al-Ansariyya, east of Latakia, to a plain Alawi family and started life as a shepherd. In 1923 he manifested supernatural powers, upon which he was proclaimed a saint by the peasantry, as the British Legation in Damascus put it;[13] he was actually recognized as the reincarnation of some celestial being, in accordance with the Alawi belief in the transfiguration of deified mortals.[14]

Another factor, which gave the Murshid 'saga' an additional unknown angle, was his doctrinal affiliation. Born into a Haidari environment he apparantly had ties with neither of the two larger Alawi doctrines, Kelaziyya and Shamaliyya (also named Qamariyya and Shamsiyya).[15] The tiny Haidari community in Syria lived in peace and relative seclusion on Jabal Darius, in the Latakia district.

The division of the Alawis into four confederations and into scores of tribes of varying size, had no correlation to doctrinal affiliation which until then – unlike in other Islamic societies – did not seem to have any bearing on social or political issues. The Amamra, to which al-Murshid belonged, was affiliated to the *Ashira* of the the Khayyatin, which was the largest of the four confederations. Such was the situation until outside factors disrupted the equilibrium. In those years, before the district of Alexandretta was handed over to Turkey and thousands of Alawis were transferred to Syria, in the late 1930s, the community of Haidari Alawis

was concentrated mainly in Cilicia and in Antioch. In the winter of 1923 the chief of the Antioch Haidaris, Sheikh Ma'ruf al-Jilly sent his son Abd al-Aziz, together with a group of Alawis from Adana, to Jabal Darius in order to strengthen relations with his local followers.

The coming of this innocent mission was going to have far-reaching results, beyond the expectations of its members, because of developments prompted three months later by the appearance of al-Murshid, whose original name was Suleiman Yunis. Both the 'prophet' and Sheikh Abd al-Aziz stirred the innermost emotions of the Haidaris, who were thrown into a fervent religious tumult, as reported in a tone of understatement by French Intelligence, under the title *Affaire de Jobet Burghal*:

> Une série de renseignement confirme que les Alaouites Haidari de la région de Jobet Burghal, principalement les Amamras, se livrent à des pratiques religieuses inusitées.[16]

This report seemed so unusual that a marginal note, '*à vérifier*', was added. The report continued:

> Un renseignement du 30 Janvier 1924 signale, qu'un Persan jongleur, prestidigitateur et magnétiseur continuerait dans les villages avoisinnantes Jobet Burghal à étonner les fellahs par ses tours d'adresse qu'ils prennent pour des miracles.[17]

Being aware of the great need of the Amamra Haidaris for mysticism, three local sheikhs soon took the young 'prophet' under their wing. The three were Sheikh Hasan and Sheikh Brahim of Jobet Burghal, and Sheikh Saleh of nearby Jurine. They invited the local peasantry to take part in their ceremonies which, according to French views, resembled those of the Derwishes who used to travel in Syria and North Africa, as well as those of the Hindu fetishists. From the descriptions, these ceremonies may be identified as 'popular' religion: they were usually characterized by convulsions or trembling, screaming and swooning.

What bothered the French authorities was not the nature of those ceremonies but rather the fact that when they were over the Sheikhs would exploit the mental state of the audience in order to collect money on behalf of the 'prophet', or some other spiritual body, whose nature the French were unable to gauge.

Since the new separate 'Confrérie', that was founded by the 'prophet' and his supporters seemed to the French to be devoid of any political significance, they did not interfere. Other people in the area, namely

several other Alawi Sheikhs, were extremely worried by these occurrences.[18]

Material interests, involving the new association, soon dictated very fast moves in its development: the young 'prophet' – called in French reports 'le Thaumaturge de Jobet Burghal' – awakened with his prophecies and 'miracles' old hatreds and rivalries between Kelaziyya and Haidariyya notables, and produced vain efforts in both schools to share the three Sheikhs' income.[19] Economic competition between members of the two schools also were deepened over marketing the famous Abu-Riha Tobacco, which Amamra farmers produced. As a result of the new tensions, those farmers insisted on using exclusively the services of Haidari traders, and chased away by threats Kelazi as well as Christian merchants.

In view of the unrest and deterioration of relations between the Amamra and their neighbours, the French Mandatory authorities sent a *mudir* to Jobet Burghal, to restore order, which he did, at least temporarily. He persuaded the two tribes of Amamra and Dariusa – among whom the 'new religion' or 'the religion then being born' was being spread – to move their centre from Jobet Burghal to Merdash.

Other Haidari chiefs were worried about their image being impaired as a result of all these happenings. Bearing in mind common rumours concerning their secretive rites and mysterious gatherings, 12 Haidari Mukhtars filed a petition with the authorities for a permission to open public sites of prayer in their villages.[20] This was a first step, and quite a revolutionary one, for the Haidaris who wished to earn a degree of legitimation from other Islamic trends, or at least moderate their criticism, by imitating their lifestyle, since it was an established fact that Alawis had no mosques.

In the meantime, the grouping around the young 'prophet' grew steadily, and so did the number of Alawi Sheikhs, who joined him. Within a month the three 'founding fathers' were replaced by a 'Haidari committee' headed by Sheikh Darwish ben Ibrahim Habib of Dirmama.[21] As a result of further unrest, the group was moved several times, according to the changing conditions: from Merdash to Shata on the Orontes incline, and from there on to Jurine to the house of a man called Taher ben abu Ali Razuq.[22]

As meeting places, members of the new 'religion' adopted old sepulchres, like the Ziara of Arbaine, in the vicinity of Mheilbe, as well as that of Sheikh Khodr, East of the village Jdeide in the district of Jeble, and the Sha'rani Ziara, north-west of Qal'at al-Mudiq. Contrary to old Alawi customs, they even held their gatherings at the Sultan Ibrahim Mosque in Jeble, causing the Sunnis to avoid visiting there at the same

time. Another sign, indicating the group's aspiration to create an impression of assimilation among the Sunnis, was their strict observance of the Ramadhan fast; in several villages, like Dirmama, the Sheikhs ordered complete abstinence during the month of Ramadhan.

French agents, who kept an open eye on the new grouping for fear of disorder, watched and documented the secret visits of pilgrims who came to see Sheikh Brahim in the darkness of the night and depart before dawn, in order to evade the attention of the authorities.

Chef du Bataillon Tracol, who was in charge of French Intelligence in the Alawi district, sensed that he was witnessing a religious happening, the nature of which he could not quite sort out. To his Western eyes the whole affair seemed nothing but witchcraft,[23] although Western monotheism contained miracles in no lesser numbers than its Eastern parallels.

All that time newcomers would join the group, turning soon into 'missionaries' of sorts, or rather fund-raising agents. Thus Sheikh Suleiman Ribhi of the Khodr tomb at Sheen in the district of Hosn conducted a pilgrimage to Jobet Burghal in the district of Sahyun, after which he returned to his village to recruit new adherents to the new religion. All new members were obliged to raise funds for constructing an Alawi mosque in Sheen.[24]

Tracol's replacement, Anfre, displayed the same interest in the mysterious group of Jobet Burghal; that tiny hamlet, whose inhabitants numbered hardly one hundred, was frequented nightly by a crowd of four hundred, who came to observe the miracles performed by Suleiman Yunis and his aide.[25] General E.L. Spears, British minister in Beirut, revealed that one of al-Murshid's techniques was to paint his shoes with phosphorescent colours and then to walk wearing them in the dark.[26] Anfre's men could not avoid noticing the tremendous change that had come over the 'prophet' who from a barefoot, raggedly dressed shepherd had become a celebrity. Marrying the daughter of Sheikh Mahmud of Dirmama, who was one of his main supporters,[27] gave him further thrust and social recognition.

Some traditional features were visible during the early stages in al-Murshid's career; the extensive use of methods in accordance with early Shiite tradition and practice of the Da'wah, such as the despatch of pioneer missionaries and propagandists to new territories, in order to create a bridgehead for the rest of the community to follow. This first element cannot be sufficiently emphasized, since it has been the Shia's principal mechanism of expansion, from Transoxania in the eighth century to the Lebanon of the twentieth century.

Another traditional pattern, moulded after the Prophet Muhammad's political marriages, can also be traced to that early stage. Not only did al-

Murshid marry the daughter of his supporter, but he also took several other wives, including a Christian woman he married while in exile in Raqqa, on the Euphrates.

One example of patterns of behaviour characteristic of the Batiniyya in general, and Alawiyya in particular, can also be found during the formative years: the self-sacrifice by Alawis, who were willing to be imprisoned in place of holy imams. Such was the case, when Sheikh Darwish, who had won a great deal of respect among the new Confrérie, gave himself up to the authorities and was imprisoned by them; a man named Sheikh Bilal then offered to go to jail in his place.[28]

During the early days of his career, while he was still Suleiman Yunis, Murshid's function was primarily religious; still, the precise definition of this activity can be hardly disputed, since it depends, like so many other things, on the eyes of the beholder. He may be considered, with some qualifications, as a 'mystagogue', according to Max Weber's definition.[29] Weber, who apparently thought of the mystagogue as the religious counterpart of the demagogue, correctly characterized this as a common Near Eastern phenomenon. The mystagogue performed magical actions that contained the boon of salvation, and he differed from the magician only in degree and by the formation of a special congregation around him.

As in the case of Suleiman al-Murshid, the mystagogue usually made a living from his art, for which there was a great demand, and a dynasty of mystagogues developed on the basis of hereditary charisma. Although it must be borne in mind that Suleiman Yunis was at that time tutored and directed by his patrons, who took the initiative for every move he made, it is obvious that he was a quick learner and soon developed a leadership style of his own.

At that time intricate questions concerning Syrian unity as opposed to Alawi autonomy, engaged the political leaders in Latakia, Damascus, Beirut and Paris with growing intensity.

During the summer of 1924 a member of the French Parliament, Brunet, arrived in Latakia, to lend an ear to the grievances of the local autonomists, led by Jaber al-Abbas, Ra'is of the Khayyatin confederation, to which the Amamra belonged. Brunet's visit made a considerable stir, which drew all the attention to the Mohafaza's capital. Anfre then withdrew his attention from the mountain area, so the enigmatic and esoteric congregation was left on its own and allowed to grow in numbers and in assets.

In the wake of Brunet's visit, important changes took place in the Alawi Territory, all to the advantage of local autonomists. On 5 December 1924, shortly after the arrival of the new Haut Commissaire, General Sarrail, the region was again separated from Syria, regaining

autonomy. A few months later, in July 1925, Ernest Schoeffler, a strong opponent of Syrian unity, was appointed new Governor of the Alawi Territory.[30] Having been previously *délégué* in Damascus, Schoeffler had a close acquaintance with all Syrian personalities; although now far away from the Syrian capital, he was not abandoning his efforts to decelerate or even obstruct the Nationalists' struggle for unity with the Alawi Territory.

Developments in the Alawi capital, and new views of the future as seen by the newcomers to Latakia, had immediate as well as direct repercussions upon the Haidaris of Jobet Burghal. In the short interim period, when there was little or no control of its activities, the small *confrérie*, according to French reports, turned into a sect. From the district of Sahyun it spread south, to the district of Jabal Helu, and over the Territory's boundaries with Syria into the Sanjak of Homs.[31]

This accelerated process of expansion, which usually meant the acquisition of whole villages by force, was not achieved without a heavy toll on the population. Following violent events in Alyate, in the Homs district not far from the Alawi border, severe warnings were issued to the sect of Jobet Burghal, including a threat to send the 'prophet' into exile.[32] Strict control was reimposed, restoring temporary peace to the area. During the summer of 1925, when the French were still handling the affair of Jobet Burghal cautiously and suspiciously, they were dealing with it only from a public security angle.

By coincidence, from the outset of the Schoeffler administration in the Territory, the leader of the Jobet Burghal sect embarked on a new road. No longer was he Suleiman Yunis, but Suleiman al-Murshid, 'the instructor', the usual title for the spiritual father of the 'Bektashiyya'[33] and other marginal Islamic sects. Although al-Murshid was at that time in exile, in the Euphrates district, he resourcefully found a way to tighten bonds between himself and his flock. In April 1926 French intelligence intercepted a letter sent by him prohibiting adherents from shaving and smoking.[34] Regional intelligence officers in Haffe, Telkalkh and Masyaf, who were requested by Anfre to examine whether those orders were being observed, soon found out that the sect expanded as far as west of Hama, sparking everywhere much enthusiasm and religious fervour.[35] This soon turned into fanaticism when a rumour spread that al-Murshid's wife was still a virgin after her marriage and that she was going to bear a son who was destined to rule the world.

Only when al-Murshid nominated Ibn Issa Id of Alyate as his representative in Homs, and started recruiting into his sect enlisted men who were serving with the Guardes Mobiles, did the French realize that they were facing a well-knit organization. From that day on, al-Murshid's

surroundings were carefully scrutinized, warnings were issued prohibiting pilgrimage to the Mother and the Son, and only small and infrequent gatherings were allowed. Pilgrims were searched and closely watched.[36]

A month later, in May 1926, Chief of Intelligence Anfre came personally, accompanied by infantry and cavalry of the Guardes Mobiles, to the Amamra at Beit Shilf and Mheilbe in the Jobet Burghal area, for a more personal impression of the situation. The enthusiastic welcome he was given made him think that it could have been a diversion, intended to persuade him to return the 'prophet' from exile; still he could not avoid the impression that although the religious fervour was as intense as ever, the issue remained unchanged as he could detect elements of temporal interests.[37]

This last observation had, like the rest of Anfre's report, no practical outcome, the situation remaining unchanged. For another half year nothing was done to stop al-Murshid's sect from further expansion. In February 1927 the intelligence services requested information about it from the Syrian services, in order to estimate the extent of its growth.[38]

Having thus secured his religious standing within the Haidariyya, al-Murshid started to reinforce his economic and social position in other Alawi circles, not alienating himself from his image of a holy man. In 1927 he made a surprising turn, which sheds light on yet another interesting aspect of his personality. For several months, he exerted great effort in order to gain recognition by the urban circles of the Alawi capital. After having been exiled, controlled and scrutinized, he must have come to realize that direct official political authority could only be gained in the city.

On 20 August 1928 al-Murshid became member of the Freemasons in Latakia, who were directly affiliated to the Grand Orient de France. The new Latakia intelligence chief, de Cadudal, noted that it was al-Murshid's intention to enlist wide support in the Territory, in order to be elected to Latakia's Advisory Council. He also added that it was not uncommon to join various secret or open associations in order to enjoy mutual protection, especially in those associations of which the members were judges and government employees.[39]

Although de Cadudal's assessment was probably correct, al-Murshid must have had additional motives, based on his religious heritage: one hundred years earlier, in 1824, the dragoman of the French Consulate in Latakia, Felix Dupont, pointed out about the Alawis: 'Ils se reconnaissent par signes comme les francs-maçons'.[40] It was also stated by travellers that the Alawis were acquainted with the term *firmasun* and used it to describe the nature of their religion.

Yet, developments in spheres of influence far beyond his reach slowed

down al-Murshid's new venture. A change in French policy towards Syria in 1928 resulted in the temporary strengthening of the Unionist trend in the Alawi Territory, reducing the number of the sect's supporters. One of its active propagandists, Sheikh Sha'ban of Qiqanieh in the Sanjak of Homs, returned home from fund-raising in the Telkalkh area, on 28 November, reporting that his tour had failed. Community members seemed far less believing, he said.[41]

Since the authorities found the conditions to be suitable for restraining al-Murshid's freedom, they invited him to the offices of the intelligence service in Haffe, together with his closest aide, Muhammad Khartabil. They were banned from moving about freely, without official permission; such permission would be issued only upon 'serious' grounds.[42]

This energetic policing of the sect, which lasted only as long as de Cadudal remained in office, changed six weeks later, at the arrival of his replacement, Delattre, who was an infantry captain. Reports issued by Delattre, who ironically used to call al-Murshid 'God' and his helpers 'Prophets', proved that nothing was being done. The nickname, however, was to stay with al-Murshid for the rest of his life, and beyond.

The newly gained freedom soon sent al-Murshid to graze in greener pastures. At the end of June 1929, he appeared in Jneine, some 25km east of Latakia, at the house of one of his devotees, where he was given 300 Turkish gold pounds and some jewellery. Similar ceremonies became part of the sect's established procedure, according to which Alawi notables who joined the group were recognized as of some divine embodiment and received royalties according to their rank in the religious hierarchy.[43] With renewed energy, al-Murshid decided to take part in national politics, adopting a clear anti-French stand; he assured his audience that the uneasy terms in which they were forced to live were no more than temporary, because they were going to be rescued from the hands of the (French) 'Pharaoh', just like the children of Moses.[44]

Impressed by al-Murshid's success, more Alawi notables joined him, bringing with them added prestige as well as worldly possessions. The most outstanding of those was Ali Aga Badur, chief of the Dariusa tribe, of the smaller Mtaura confederation;[45] it was expected that Badur's joining would have immediate positive repercussions and improve the attitude of the Mandatory authorities towards the sect.

Badur rushed to the intelligence offices, advocating the abolition of all restrictions on al-Murshid's moves. Local officers, who were acquainted with the coercive methods used by the sect to collect 'gifts', denied this bid, in spite of the fact that Badur was accompanied by Father Bruno Michel, head of the French community in Latakia.[46]

To intensify the pressure on the authorities, a notable, Shaker Dar-

wish, was sent to Beirut to try to convince the High Commissioner to release al-Murshid from his detention. Three more months passed, until in November 1929 their bid was granted.[47] Once freed, al-Murshid's spirit of expansionism only intensified. Imbued with a hardened spirit, he continued to advance to the south into Lebanon. The areas to the east towards Hama, and to the north up to Haffa, had already been taken in earlier campaigns.

In Lebanon, al-Murshid's men used to take the inhabitants' property, either by larceny or by robbery; an inquiry was opened only after a Sunni Dandashli notable from Lebanon filed a complaint against Suleiman Issa of Mariamin, who was one of the more efficient 'tax' collectors of the sect, and who was bestowed with the honourable title 'Sheikh Muhi ad-Din'.[48]

In the autumn of 1930 three processes which were of crucial importance to the development of al-Murshid's career arrived at a certain stage of ripening: he had achieved an impressive range of influence; preparations for the coming elections in the Territory had begun; and he was permitted to return home from exile.

Preparations for elections began with inter-tribal and inter-confederational negotiations, as well as meetings and deliberations with members of the outgoing advisory council, aimed at creating new political coalitions. These talks were heavily overshadowed by the crude intervention in the elections of Schoeffler, without the slightest effort to disguise.

In view of the steadily growing number of al-Murshid's fans, who gradually became the fifth Alawi confederation, the Ghassasneh, it was not possible to ignore them while trying to create a solid coalition. At the beginning of 1930 they already numbered many thousands, scattered all over the 'Gouvernement de Lattaquie', with closely-knit connections in every direction. At this stage al-Murshid and Khartabil began to enlist support for the Alawi opposition leader, Ibrahim al-Kinj, Ra'is of the Haddadin, one of the two larger confederations.

Al-Kinj challenged the above-mentioned chief of the Khayyatin, president of the advisory council Jaber al-Abbas, who as the favourite of the French was awarded the Croix de la Légion d'Honneur for services rendered. Since the Amamra, headed by al-Murshid, used to be part of the Khayyatin, by joining al-Kinj he was able to beat his former chief. At this point Muhammad Khartabil, al-Murshid's second in command, suddenly revealed independent political aspirations, expressing his wish to run personally for the elections 'only if permitted to do so'.[49] This was quite an ambitious step for a former village constable, who became a prophet and was now at the commencement of a political career.[50]

The importance of the Jobet Burghal sect could not escape the attention of Latakia politicians, some of whom took the trouble to ask for its

support. In this manner the 'moving spirit' of the sect, Shaker Darwish, was approached, but to no avail, by Council member Sheikh Ali Kamel, who was supported by the Khayyatin.[51]

Eventually, Muhammad Khartabil was elected as member of the Council in those elections, influencing other Haidari candidates, Ali Badur, Yunis Sharur and Ali Shihab also, to stand for the elections.[52] This development signalled the beginning of internal strife within the sect. Stakes had become much higher, and so also the ambitions of its leaders. Gradually, chiefs and notables of the sect were at each other's throat, mostly over acquisition of vast lands in the Territory. In one case, Mahmud Alush of Merdash in the district of Masyaf decided to leave the sect on the grounds that the Miracle Worker had failed to bring his son back to life, the real reason of his leaving being a controversy over lands in the Hama area.[53]

During 1930, while Khartabil was already occupying his seat in the Latakia Council, al-Murshid continued his fund-raising, using methods which would be unlawful in most societies. In mid-November he toured a number of villages in the Haffa area, 'receiving' 200 Dunams from the local Mheilbe tribe.[54] Collecting immovables had by then become his main pastime, but he was not the only one; Aziz al-Hawash, Ra'is of the smaller Mtaura confederation, was reported to have cheated his own father, Ismail, robbing him of a quarter of a village.[55] Still, al-Murshid was always more consistent in these matters, fixing payments of 25 per cent from all his followers' income.

In March 1931 the first reports of cracks in al-Murshid's leadership appeared. It seemed that his excessive indulgence in worldly affairs, as well as Khartabil's growing confidence because of his new status as city politician, gave the latter the notion that he was more fit to lead the sect. It is interesting to note that, contrary to al-Murshid who, inspite of his utter despotic methods, never objected to share his 'rule' with others, Khartabil intended to depose al-Murshid and replace him as sole ruler.[56] In his weekly report of 8 August 1931, E. Schoeffler reported dissention among 'the two magicians of the Alawi sect of Jobet Burghal' and Khartabil's request that the authorities intervene.[57] At the end of September of the same year it seemed as though the two had decided to part: while al-Murshid kept his status as the incarnation of the divinity, his aide Khartabil revealed satisfaction with the wealth he had accumulated, announcing that he was parting from his colleagues, whom he described as being members of a 'religion of clowns'.[58] Despite the constant friction and Khartabil's efforts to abort al-Murshid's leadership, the two continued their long-standing partnership. Parts of the sect felt deep yearning for al-Murshid's masterdom, while others were overwhelmed by his

tyranny; this framework had consolidated his leadership to such an extent that it became difficult to challenge.

The economic crisis, which struck the European and American continents in the 1930s, was soon to be felt in the Levant too. Accute inflation, one of its main illnesses, was 'imported' from France through its tight commercial relations with the Levant countries, and there was no way for the shaky economy of the Alawi Territory to avoid the oncoming disaster.

However, it was business as usual for one activity: tax collecting by Suleiman al-Murshid. His avarice drove him repeatedly on endless tours of *zakat*-collecting, in a way that was typical to Sunni landowners in Syria, grinding his compatriots without mercy. Since cash was no longer available, peasants offered him some of their tobacco crops. A Masyaf notable who dared to protest was whipped by al-Murshid personally, thereupon hurrying to kiss his hand.[59]

French Mandatory officials, who were receiving weekly reports, were well aware of al-Murshid's actions but did nothing to remedy the situation, owing to the French policy of leaving the 'locals' to their own affairs, as long as law and public order were not impaired. Schoeffler, who signed those reports, commented as follows, about al-Murshid and Khartabil: 'The District Deputy Inspector will try to moderate their action'.[60] This comment, which was no more than lip-service, had no consequences, except the renewal of punitive excursions by al-Murshid, in which he reasserted his authority in the area of the Orontes.[61] After previous campaigns had resulted in the expansion of his influence among Alawis, including those in Syrian territory, he now earned respect and recognition among the Bedouin population there as well.[62]

By then al-Murshid had united under his direct influence three tribes, the Amamra, Dariusa and Mheilbe, nearly 13,000 souls, fearing and obeying him blindly. A warning issued then to the Governor's office, that his increasing control over the Bedouin would present hazards to security,[63] came too late. Many chiefs from outside the region asked al-Murshid to support them, like the famous Alawi leader of the 1919 anti-French insurrection, Sheikh Saleh al-Alyy, who asked for military help against his old foes, the Isma'ilis; al-Murshid, wise enough not to put his own men in jeopardy, chose to act by proxy sending the Bedouin instead. A request for political support by the Alawi Sheikh Mansur of Homs towards the 1932 elections in Syria[64] clearly emphasized al-Murshid's involvement in Syrian affairs. There was hardly anything left which could prevent him from becoming a national political figure.

For three years, from August 1928, it seemed as though al-Murshid had given up his old dream of gaining the recognition of the urban circles in

Latakia and winning a seat on the Council. His rival and former partner, Muhammad Khartabil, who had got himself elected to the Council, must have given him many a sleepless night. Using his well-known methods of intimidation, al-Murshid thoroughly ostracized Khartabil, who could no longer find one single farmhand to cultivate his lands.[65]

Khartabil's promotion, as well as the prolonged economic recession, had an adverse effect on al-Murshid's campaign and for nearly a year he seemed to be hibernating. His devotees, seeing him in his ebb, immediately clenched their fists. Other Alawi confederations, similarly suffering the effects of the grave economic situation, also ceased paying the *zakat*, unable to afford being taxed twice – by the Latakia government, as well as by their tribal chiefs.

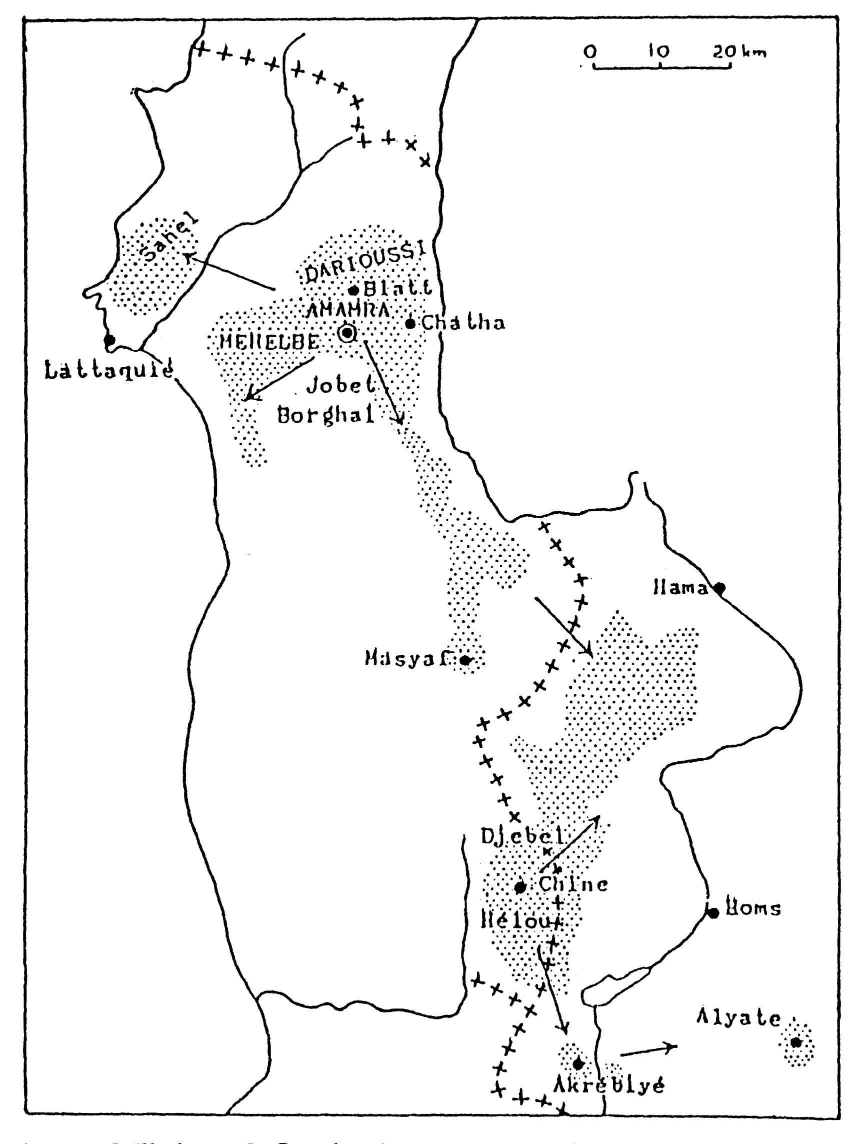
Moreover, the Jobet Burghal sect was now subdivided into several factions, and the weaker al-Murshid became the more his former assistants grew in prestige. He drew the inevitable conclusions, came down from the mountains, and announced his intention to stay in the capital at least for the duration of the winter of 1932.[66] For many months al-Murshid was troubled and distressed, unable to regain his former standing, although paradoxically his confederation, the Ghassasneh, was still flourishing. Hostile manoeuvres by his former helpers who were pleased to exploit the situation and gain influence at his expense, lowered his spirits.[67]

In the spring of 1934 it was obvious that al-Murshid was emerging from the crisis, with reinforced determination. New times were dawning over the mountain tribes, most likely as a result of al-Murshid's absence. There was an atmosphere of *rapprochement* among Alawi tribes, factions and confederations. Old rivalries between two confederations, the Kalbiyya and Mtaura, were now resolved. Al-Murshid, who had by then been reduced to his former rank as Muqaddam of the Amamra, understood that it was the right time for him to return. He negotiated with the Dariusa and Mheilbe, his old allies, intending to create a new, politically oriented bloc called Haidariyya-Ghassaniyya. It was his idea to attach to them the Alawis in the Latakia area who had no confederational affiliation at all.

His prolonged stay in Latakia was not wasted after all, as this new development proved. Watching closely the political situation in Latakia, he soon found out the loophole through which he could penetrate the system. Having learnt the bitter lesson of the past, for some time he worked behind the scene, hiding himself from the authorities. It so happened that although the intelligence was aware of the new Haidariyya-Ghassaniyya group and even assessed that 'this bloc will be interested that its voice be heard, at the right moment',[68] it did not detect

MAP I

EXPANSION AREAS OF SULEIMAN AL-MURSHID'S CONFEDERATION IN THE LATE 1930s, ACCORDING TO JACQUES WEULERSSE



Source: J. Weulersse, *Le Pays des Alaouites* (Tours, 1940).

the special al-Murshid touch, hidden under a different guise. This impression was repeated in April 1934 when inter-tribal negotiations were held; numerous meetings of sheikhs from various tribes were interpreted by the French as an all-Alawi activity rather than as al-Murshid's doing, which indeed it was. In the spring of that year there was intensive reconciliation among all Alawi tribes, so it was much easier to misjudge the phenomenon.

Against this background, no one was surprised when Jaber al-Abbas, the deposed President of the Advisory Council in Latakia and for many years the most powerful man in the Alawi community, humiliated himself by travelling to al-Murshid, begging for his support.[69] Apparently, al-Abbas too made an error of judgement, deluding himself into believing that, as Ra'is of the Khayyatin, he might be of significance to his former underling. Al-Murshid, who must have pondered at that moment an the long way he had come, and perhaps also on all his ups and downs along the road, was polite in the extreme. Although he probably did not value al-Abbas' request as even worth considering, he did not dismiss him outright; he had first to discuss it with his partners, he told al-Abbas.

As well as becoming a confederational Ra'is, instead of a mystic god with dubious reputation, al-Murshid also changed his view of the French: he no longer saw them as blood enemies but as a source of strength and as welcome allies. Only then, and after an interim period, was al-Murshid finally absorbed into the political circles of Latakia.

In conclusion, al-Murshid started as a small tribal chief in the Alawi hinterland. Born into a Haidari environment, he created a leadership characterized by methods typical of this school. He consolidated his social and financial standing through methods used by traditional Syrian leaders, eventually becoming deputy in the Syrian National Assembly in Damascus. He was a controversial figure, different from and disagreeable to most of his contemporaries. Viewed in a historical perspective, he seems like a medieval figure in a modernizing world. He stood in the way of Syrian unity and ended his career on the rope of a Syrian hangman in 1946, citing the words of the *shahada*.[70]

NOTES

This article is based on a Tel Aviv University dissertation by the present writer, 'Between Separatism and Union: The Autonomy of the Alawi Region in Syria, 1920–1936' (Hebrew), under the supervision of Professor I. Rabinovich and Dr M. Kramer.

1. In April 1930, following the elections, Ibrahim al-Kinj replaced Jaber al-Abbas as President of the Council. MAE (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères), Bey-1987 , ff.
2. A summary of al-Murshid's career was written by Terence Shone, the British minister

in Beirut, in the seven page despatch to Anthony Eden, 19 March 1945, FO 371–45562; see also Itamar Rabinovich and Gitta Yaffe, 'An Anthropologist as a Political Officer: Evans-Pritchard, the French and the Alawis', in Haim Shamir (ed.), *France and Germany in an Age of Crisis, 1900–1960: Studies in Memory of Charles Bloch*, Leiden: Brill, 1990, pp. 177–89.

3. H.S. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate* (Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 210; A.H. Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: a Political Essay* (London, 1946), p. 214; E.L. Spears, *Fulfilment of a Mission: The Spears Mission to Syria and Lebanon, 1941–1944* (London, 1977), pp. 203–4.
4. Report by Col. MacKereth and General Holmes to FO, written at General Spears' request. Sommerset, 9 Oct. 1944, FO 371–40318.
5. Abu al-Haytham, *al-Islam fi muwajahat al-Batiniyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Sahwa, 1985), pp. 101–4.
6. Ibid.
7. Also known as 'MS Berlin 4291', p. 56b.
8. Kamel Ismail, *Die Sozialoekonomische Verhaeltnisse der baeuerlichen Bevoelkerung im Kuestengebiet der Syrischen Arabischen Republik* (East Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1975), p. 24; Salah Jdid, Syria's strong man in the pre-Asad era, used to pay Zakat to Alawi tribal chiefs. See Sami al-Jundi, Al-Ba'th, Nazareth, Maktabat Fouad Daniel, n.d. (1969), pp. 144–5.
9. Munir ash-Sharif, *al-Muslimun al-Alawiyyun: man hum wa-ayna hum*? (Damascus, al-Maktaba al-Kubra, 1946), p. 79.
10. R. Strothmann, 'Die Nusiari im heutigen Syrien', in *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaft* (Göttingen, 1950), p. 33.
11. Ibid , p. 35.
12. The title *Murshid* (guide), denominating religious leaders, is likewise customary also in the Shiite Ali Allahi community, also called *Ahl al-Haqq*. H. Busse, *Der Islam*, Vol. 46 (1970), p. 80.
13. Terence Shone, British Legation in Beirut, 19 March 1945, FO 371–45553.
14. Sheikh Mahmud ibn al-Hussein al-Nusairi, '*Akhbar wa-riwayat an mawalina Ahl al-Bayt minhum as-salam*', in Rudolph Strothmann, *Esoterische Sonderthemen bei den Nusairi* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958).
15. A detailed description of the Alawi doctrines is in René Dussaud, *Histoire et Religion des Nosairis* (Paris: Émile Bouillon, 1900), pp. 77–103. Dussaud counted four sects: Haidaris, Chamalis, Kalazis and Ghaibis and admitted that he had very little information about the Haidaris. The MAE documents mentioned the Haidariyya-Ghaibiyya several times. In 1930 two *ad hoc* political groups, Haidariyya-Shamaliyya and Haidariyya-Ghassaniyya were formed. 'Bulletins de Renseignements', 7, (302/SR) 25 Jan. 1930 and 9, (414/SR) 1 Feb. 30, *MAE-Bey-1987*; 'Bulletin Hebdomadaire d'Information', No. 15, 15 April 1933, *MAE-Bey-1989*. Haidari chief, Sheikh Abdallah al-Jilly, father of Sheikh Ma'ruf al-Jilly, mentioned only three Alawi sects: Haidaris, Ghaibis and Kilazis. Henry Lammens, 'Une visite au Saih Suprême des Nosairis Haidaris', *Journal Asiatique*, Vol.11 (1915), p.146.
16. 'Note de Renseignement', 6 (160/SR), 5 Feb. 1924, *MAE-Bey-1986*.
17. This was the only time al-Murshid was referred to as a Persian.
18. See note 16.
19. 'Note de Renseignement', 11 (235/SR), Feb. 1924, *MAE-Bey-1986*.
20. Ibid., 7 (183/SR) & 8 (207/SR), Feb. 1924, *MAE-Bey-1986*.
21. Ibid., 13 (253/SR), 1 March 1924.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 26 (420/SR), 15 April 1924.
24. Ibid., 54 (1213/SR), 14 Oct. 1924, MAE-Bey-1986.
25. Ibid., 9 (402/SR), 3 April 1925.
26. E.L. Spears, *Fulfilment of a Mission*, p. 204.
27. 'Note de Renseignement', 9 (402/SR), 3 April 1925, *MAE-Bey-1986*.
28. Ibid., 13 (253/SR), 1 March 1924.

29. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* [1922] (Boston: Beacon, 1969), pp. xxxv, xxxiii, ff.
30. Smart to Foreign Office, Damascus, 20 July 1925, FO 371–10850; Telegramme No. 126, Damascus Legation to Foreign Office, 24 Oct. 1923. FO 371–9054.
31. Rapport pour l'Année 1925, Lattaquie, 11 Feb. 1926, *MAE-Bey-1839*, p. 6.
32. Ibid ; 'Bulletin de Renseignement', 1–15 May 1925, *MAE-Bey-1986*.
33. K. Müller, *Kulturhistorische Studien zur Genese pseudo islamischer Sektengebilde in Vorderasien*. (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1967), p. 39.
34. The Haidari prohibition against shaving was mentioned by Lammens, '*Une visite*' etc., p. 146.
35. 'Note de Renseignement', 9 (730/SR), 10 April 1926, *MAE-Bey-464/1926-1941*.
36. 'Bulletin de Renseignement', 16–31 March 1926 (684/SR), *MAE-Bey-1986* and 'Note de Renseignement', 9, see note 35.
37. 'Bulletin de Renseignement', 1–15 May 1926 (862/SR), *MAE-Bey-1986*.
38. 'Bulletin de Renseignement', 1–15 Feb. 1927 (307/SR).
39. 'Bulletin de Renseignement', (1958/SR), 5 Sept. 1928, *MAE-Bey-1986*.
40. Felix Dupont, 'Mémoires sur les mœurs et les cérémonies religieuses des Nesserié, connus en Europe sous le nom d'Ansari', *Journal Asiatique*, Vol. 5 (1824), p. 131.
41. 'Bulletin de Renseignement', 34 (2665/SR), 7 Dec. 1928, MAE-Bey, 1986.
42. Ibid., (1094/SR), 1 June 1929, *MAE-Bey-1987*.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 51 (1766/SR), 7 Aug. 1929, ibid.
45. Ali Aga Badur was described as 'grand diable d'ivrogne, brutal, féroce même, et orgueilleux comme un paon', see J. de la Roche, 'Notes sur les débuts de notre occupation du Territoire des Alaouites', *L'Asie Française* (Dec. 1931), p. 369.
46. 'Bulletin de Renseignement', 55 (1864/SR), 17 Aug. 1929, *MAE-Bey-1987*.
47. See note 44.
48. 'Bulletin de Renseignement', 68 (2417/SR), 15 Oct. 1929, *MAE-Bey-1987*.
49. Ibid., 2 (82/SR), 8 Jan. 1930, ibid.
50. Direction de Service de Rensignements, Information No. 594 Beyrouth, 25 Aug. 1930, *MAE-Bey-464/1921–1932*.
51. 'Bulletin de Renseignement', 2 (82/SR), 8 Jan. 1930, *MAE-Bey-1987*.
52. Ibid., 7 (302/SR), 25 Jan. 1930, ibid.
53. Ibid., 8 (370/SR), 29 Jan. 1930, ibid.
54. Ibid., 70 (3649/SR), 24 Nov. 1930, *MAE-Bey-1987*.
55. Ibid., 67 (3340/SR), 25 Oct. 1930, ibid.
56. 'Bulletin Hebdomadaire d'Information', No. 5, Bureau Politique, 7 March 1931, *MAE-Bey-1989*.
57. Ibid., No. 26, 8 Aug. 1931, ibid.
58. Ibid., No. 33, 26 Sept. 1931, ibid.
59. Ibid., No. 36, 10 Oct. 1931, *MAE-Bey-1989*.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., No. 39, 31 Oct. 1931, ibid.
62. Ibid., No. 42, 21 Nov. 1931, *MAE-Bey-1989*. There was a Bedouin tribal chief named Amir Suleiman ibn Murshid in the Hama area. Bulletin de Rens. No. 69, 7.11.1930, *MAE-Bey-1987*.
63. 'Bulletin de Renseignement', 42, 21 Nov. 1931, *MAE-Bey-1989*.
64. Ibid., 45, 12 Dec. 1931, ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., 45, 5 Nov. 1932, *MAE-Bey-1989*.
67. Ibid., 35, 2 Sept. 1933, ibid.
68. Ibid., 12, 24 March 1934, *MAE-Bey-1866*.
69. Ibid., 18, 5 May 1934, ibid.
70. Abu al-Haytham, *al-Islam fi muwajahat al-Batiniyya*, p. 103.